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SHOW AND TELL:

HOW DAVID HEALTH SOLUTIONS UTILIZES CUSTOMER REFERENCE CASES IN SALES OPERATIONS

Master's Thesis
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Abstract

This thesis describes the phenomenon of customer reference utilization at David Health Solutions, the case company chosen for this research. The objective of this descriptive research is to understand how the case company's sales organization utilizes customer reference cases in sales operations.

The literature review focuses on defining customer reference cases and how cases are utilized as described in the Simplified reference model (Salminen & Möller, 2006). Prior research sources are also used to investigate the purposes, objectives, and factors that affect reference case utilization. The literature is included in the discussion pertaining to the empirical findings of this thesis.

The research was carried out using a qualitative approach. The research follows an embedded single-case study method, focusing on the sales organization of the chosen case company. The case company in question is David Health Solutions, a Finnish firm that manufactures and sells musculoskeletal rehabilitation technology to customers around the world. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the case company's internal management as well as its first-tier distribution partners from seven international markets.

The findings highlight key themes in reference case utilization during sales operations of David Health Solutions and its distribution network. These themes include customer reference cases, customer reference visits, sales material, sales meetings, and further development of sales processes.

The discussion goes on to relate the findings of the empirical research to the literature, with emphasis placed on the relation to the Simplified reference model. The topics of the discussion include how reference case utilization applies to the defined context of the study, what customer references are shared and with whom, and how these reference cases are communicated. This provides insight into how the case company utilizes and communicates customer reference cases. The discussion also highlights managerial implications for the case company to consider.

Keywords customer reference cases, customer stories, sales operations

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1. INTRODUCTION

"We are in the Facebook era and people love to look at what other neighbors are doing and love to copy it."

- Managing Director (Distributor)

The quote above points to a practical reason why consumers and suppliers alike utilize online platforms such as Facebook. The quote from one of David Health Solutions' distributor partners alludes to the fact that people and businesses are interested in what their counterparts are doing. This idea of virtually peeking over the fence into a neighbor's yard is a way for individuals and entities to discover new ways of doing specific tasks, such as solving musculoskeletal problems with intelligent devices. For a business, this can be interpreted as the process of utilizing communication channels to share products and services through storytelling and customer references. The purpose of this action is to spark buyer interest and increase sales.

In the case of business-to-business organizations specifically, this represents the idea of sharing stories of existing customers utilizing a product offering to show potential customers how they can utilize the supplier's offering to reach the same outcomes for their end users. The overarching purpose for the supplier is to generate more sales and more happy customers. This can then result in more customer reference cases. Business-to-business firms use customer reference cases as intangible assets to exhibit possible value creation for potential customers (Storbacka, 2011; Terho et al., 2012; Töytäri & Rajala, 2015). This 'value creation' is subjective and therefore cannot be easily calculated, but it can be interpreted to mean what worth the potential customer places on a product/service offering. Reference cases are considered important in business-to-business sales and marketing efforts due to the higher complexity, larger investment needs, and increased innovativeness of product offerings (Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola, 2013). Furthermore, the importance of customer references in the purchasing decision-making process is increasing (Kumar, Petersen, & Leone, 2013; Terho & Jalkala, 2017). This is because current information and knowledge transfer is more instant and widespread (Kumar, Petersen & Leone, 2013). Therefore product/service information and knowledge, such as customer experiences and stories, are continuously shared online and in real time to buyers and potential customers. This means suppliers should take note.

Customer reference cases are not merely viewed as simple customer acquisition tools. They can be utilized as dynamic resources fulfilling many purposes including building reputation, proving value, and reducing risk (Anderson & Wynstra, 2010, Salminen & Möller, 2010; Terho & Jalkala, 2017). This implies that the usage of customer reference cases can be directly looked at from a resource-based perspective. Researchers Hooley, Broderick, and Möller (1998) categorize reference cases as customer-based assets and in fact consider them to be the most important type of marketing asset, regardless of their intangibility. Customer-based assets are intangible because they are directly derived from what the customer, potential or actual, feels or thinks about the product offering (ibid.). Nevertheless, the stated importance may refer to the fact that customer references are a comprehensible representation or direct link to the firms' established customer relationships.

The utilization of marketing assets is common practice; however, the discussion can also expand to include customer relationships in business-to-business markets. This focus on relationship-building in the business-to-business sector is mainly due to the dependency and trust that are present in the buyer-supplier dynamic (Kumar, Petersen, & Leone, 2013; Viio & Grönroos, 2014). Moreover, this significance inflates for companies with higher-value product offerings (Anderson & Wynstra, 2010; Kumar, Petersen, & Leone, 2013; Hada, Grewal, & Lilien, 2014).

However, the question remains as to how this customer reference utilization process looks like and what resources and processes make this possible. This thesis describes the phenomenon of reference case utilization within the context of a case company.

1.1. Background of the study

Sales and marketing operations of international organizations include a treasure trove of tools designed to display products and services as well as spark buyer interest. These toolboxes are as unique and complex as the companies that utilize them. A company's sales and marketing toolbox can include many different reference cases and customer stories, from marketing videos to sales presentations, all in varying media from sensory to digital to print.

This thesis sets out to describe the utilization of customer stories and reference cases in the context of a case company. This includes exploration into how the chosen company and its sales organization bring these customer cases to the attention of potential customers.

The case company in question is "the world leader in rehabilitation solutions for musculoskeletal problems" (David Health Solutions, 2019). The firm manufactures and sells medical rehabilitation equipment that is equipped with software and a cloud-based IT platform (ibid.). The company's reported turnover in 2019 was 4.13 million euros with a profit of 110,000 euros (Parviainen, 2019). The product offering, the DAVID Solution, includes physical musculoskeletal rehabilitation devices as well as an incorporated cloud service for tracking and reporting of patients' use of the devices (David Health Solutions, 2019). The company's roots are Finnish with its headquarters in Helsinki and manufacturing facilities located in Outokumpu, Finland. However, distributor operations and customers are spread across the globe. The company has customers in more than 30 countries. David Health Solutions' main customer target markets include healthcare facilities ranging from physiotherapy clinics, hospitals, orthopedic centers, health and wellness centers, to company prevention programs (ibid.).

An interview conducted with the CEO and founder of the company sheds light on the sales operations at David Health Solutions. The sales organization includes an internal Sales Director who manages direct sales as well as oversees an extensive network of international distributors. These partners are in charge of sales within their specific country or region (Parviainen, 2019). Within the distribution network, there are distributors labeled as first-tier partners. This status alludes to the fact that the distributor has full control of the specific market. Some of the partners in question are well established within their markets and have a long history of working with David Health Solutions. On the other hand, a few of the first-tier distributors are recent partnerships, with only 1-2 years of co-operation with the company. These markets are in the early stages of sales operations.

1.2. Research objectives and questions

The research focuses on a case study within the context of the Finnish company, David Health Solutions. More specifically, the empirical research seeks to describe how the case company's internal management and external first-tier distributor network utilize customer reference cases. This empirical research seeks to provide insight into this undocumented phenomenon within the defined context.

The main objective of this study is not to fill a research gap, rather to describe and detail a phenomenon that has not been documented within David Health Solutions. Phenomenon based research is designed to "capture, describe and document, as well as conceptualize, a phenomenon so that appropriate theorizing and the development of research designs can proceed" (von Krogh, Rossi-Lamastra, & Hafliger, 2012, p. 278). In other words, this research takes an exploratory approach within a defined, specific context in order to describe the observable phenomenon. This means that the research does not aim to corroborate or debunk previous academic research. Rather, it serves to describe the phenomenon, after which its ties to previous academic research are considered. A research question is used to define the purpose of this thesis research properly.

In this empirical study, I investigate the phenomenon of utilizing customer reference cases in the international sales operations of the case company David Health Solutions. Overall, the objective of this descriptive research is to understand how the company's sales network of first-tier partners and distributors utilizes customer references in their sales operations. Therefore, the qualitative research focuses on the following research question:

- ***How does David Health Solutions utilize customer reference cases in its international sales operations of high-tech medical rehabilitation devices?***

The research question is supported with sub-questions in order to guide the research. These highlight the applicability of utilizing customer references as well as how the reference cases are communicated to potential buyers. The research sub-questions are as follows:

- *Is it relevant for the case company's distributor network to utilize customer reference cases in sales operations?*
- *How are reference cases communicated within the case company's international sales organization?*

The reason for this investigation of customer reference utilization relates to my initial experience as an employee at David Health Solutions. After starting at David Health Solutions as a Marketing and Sales Associate in autumn 2018, I could not help but question the lack in customer reference cases available on our website and in our sales presentations. In the beginning of my employment, it was difficult for me to understand how extensive and international our customer network is. To me, it seemed that there was hardly any documentation or material available on customers. An 18-page reference list document which included installments of DAVID technology categorized by country made me realize how extensive the company's customer network was. However, the list provided no practical understanding as to how these physiotherapy clinics and hospitals are operating or how well they are treating patients with musculoskeletal problems. Only by visiting the Finnish reference clinic, which works closely with David Health Solutions, was I able to see how the clinic operates and talk to people whose quality of life has vastly improved because of the DAVID device-based physiotherapy program. This is how my interest in customer reference utilization started.

Rather than keep it as a mere interest, I decided to research the phenomenon more in-depth. I believe this lack in reference material could be an underlying reason as to why our company is relatively unknown to healthcare professionals in the musculoskeletal rehabilitation sector. Therefore, I believe it is worthwhile to investigate and document this phenomenon to better understand how the David Health Solutions international sales organization utilizes customer reference cases.

In order to answer the research question and describe how David Health Solutions utilizes customer reference cases in its sales operations, I chose a qualitative case study approach.

The data collection includes conducting interviews with key personnel from the internal management at David Health Solutions, as well as its first-tier international distributor partners.

1.3. Structure of the thesis

This thesis is structured into four main sections. In the introduction section, I discussed several facets including background to the study as well as the research objectives and questions. Following this, I consider relevant academic literature and research. This provides insight into previous research on the phenomenon of customer reference case utilization. The topics include definition of customer references, the utilization process as exemplified in a research model, purpose and objectives of reference utilization, and factors affecting reference case utilization.

The proceeding section on the research design and methodology provides a detailed account of how I designed this empirical study and what qualitative methods I used. I also provide justifications for data collection and the relevant methods in this section. Moreover, the chosen data analysis method is detailed. I conclude this section with considerations for validity and reliability of the study.

In the following chapter, I discuss the qualitative findings of the empirical study. This is followed by a discussion on the relevance and connection of the study's findings with the academic literature discussed in the literature review section. In the final section of this thesis, I provide conclusions and a summary of the research. I also describe practical implications for David Health Solutions' management and sales organization, as well as limitations and suggestions for further research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review focuses on previous academic research on the concept of customer reference cases and their utilization by suppliers. The purpose of this literature review is to understand what previous studies have found regarding customer reference utilization. This may help to explain the findings from this case study. The section includes defining the term and how reference cases are communicated. The discussion also considers an established conceptual framework, which describes how cases are utilized in the supplier-buyer dynamic. To support this, objectives and factors affecting reference case utilization are discussed further.

2.1. Defining customer reference cases

Many companies, especially those in business-to-business markets, use existing customers as references in sales and marketing operations (Salminen & Möller, 2006; Terho & Jalkala, 2017). These reference cases are regarded as important sources of information for buyers seeking useful, credible, and accurate information on a potential supplier (Brashear-Alejandro et al., 2011; Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola, 2013). Defining customer reference cases considers the different terminology, practical definitions of the term, and ways of communicating these references.

Customer references cases have many different terms in academic literature. Popular and universally-accepted terms include customer reference marketing (Terho & Jalkala, 2017), customer references (Salminen & Möller, 2006), experience-based information (Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola, 2013), client references (Kumar, Petersen, & Leone, 2013), customer stories (Gorry & Westbrook, 2011), and simply reference customers (Anderson & Wynstra, 2010). For the sake of clarity, I will use the terms 'customer reference cases', 'customer references' and 'reference cases' interchangeably when referring to the topic in question.

Different terminology breeds different definitions. In general terms, a customer reference is defined as "an indirect proof, based on some practical or concrete evidence, like product, service or systems delivery, of a supplier's capability of delivery" (Salminen & Möller, 2006, p. 5). This definition has been referred to in academic literature as a widely accepted general definition for customer references (Aarikka-Stenroos & Makkonen, 2014; Terho & Jalkala, 2017). On the other hand, more recent studies have taken the definition a step forward.

A firm utilizes customer reference cases when it shares information from preexisting customer relationships for marketing and sales purposes with the intention of attracting new customers and more business (Jalkala & Salminen, 2010; Terho & Jalkala, 2017). Researchers Aarikka-Stenroos and Makkonen also agree with this relationship focus and define customer references as a platform from business-to-business suppliers to demonstrate past relationships that have resulted in projects and solution implementations (Aarikka-Stenroos & Makkonen, 2014). These definitions highlight the role customer references have as evidence of the buyer-supplier dynamic. In addition, there are specific aspects of the relationship that customer reference cases target. Rather than being considered simply proof of a supplier's capability to deliver, recent studies have gone a step further to imply that reference cases build reputation and act as value evidence (Terho & Jalkala, 2017).

Researchers Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola define their term for customer reference cases (or experience-based information) as "information that offers access to other business actors' experiences and perceptions on the service and relationship with the supplier" (Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola, 2013, p. 1). This means reference cases describe the experience a buyer has had with a supplier. For a potential customer, this offers proof that the relationship can provide a positive experience. This goes hand in hand with the definition that reference cases are evidence of the value derived between the buyer and supplier (Anderson & Wynstra, 2010; Terho & Jalkala, 2017). There is an inherent problem in defining 'value' as it is a subjective concept. However, it can be derived in this case to mean that for a potential customer, the reference case provides evidence that desired outcomes have been generated between the established customer and the supplier in question. These definitions related to the experience and evidence of the buyer-supplier dynamic help to clarify how and why a seller utilizes reference cases. They provide more insight because they highlight practical uses to customer references. This takes the definition a step further from Salminen and Möller's interpretation of what reference cases are and what supplier-related information the cases provide.

Customer references help provide evidence of a supplier's product offering and the firm's ability to deliver. In addition, reference cases provide a potential customer an understanding of customers' experiences with the supplier and how they perceived the buyer-supplier relationship. Customer references also help highlight potential benefits of choosing the supplier, including the overall experience and value outcomes achieved. A firm can utilize reference cases for different purposes.

Firms can use customer reference cases for internal or external practice (Salminen & Möller, 2006). Internal use can mainly be seen in sales training scenarios or when showing proof of product usability and functionality to members within the organization (Salminen & Möller, 2006; Terho & Jalkala, 2017). In sales, the relevant utilization is the external category, which refers to the supplier using references when dealing directly with potential buyers and other stakeholders (Salminen & Möller, 2006; Terho et al., 2012). Although these categories are defined in literature, there is no discussion on how they differ in practice. There are no defined distinctive characteristics that clarify the difference, other than the audience the reference case is presented to. In this research, I focus on the external practice of utilizing customer reference cases because I want to understand how the sales organization uses reference cases in sales opportunities, not how customer references are utilized within the distribution partners' internal network. There are several ways of depicting and communicating customer references to potential customers.

The common ways of communicating customer references are categorized into sales tools and verbal communication. Sales tools include reference lists, articles in trade journals, press releases, promotional material, and the Internet (Salminen & Möller, 2006). These refer to written or illustrative depictions that demonstrate projects and/or solution implementations between the supplier and a past buyer (Aarikka-Stenroos & Makkonen, 2014). Customer references in sales tools can be anything from descriptions, quotations, statistics, and datasets, to name a few. Moreover, pictures, videos, and audio can also help communicate a reference case (Kumar, Petersen & Leone, 2013). These illustrative depictions are considered richer formats of evidence for influencing a potential customer because they convey the supplier's added effort to highlight the established customer reference (ibid.). Visual and audial aids also provide proof that the existing customer exists, which in turn increases a feeling of trust for the potential customer (Kumar, Petersen & Leone, 2013; Aarikka-Stenroos & Makkonen, 2014).

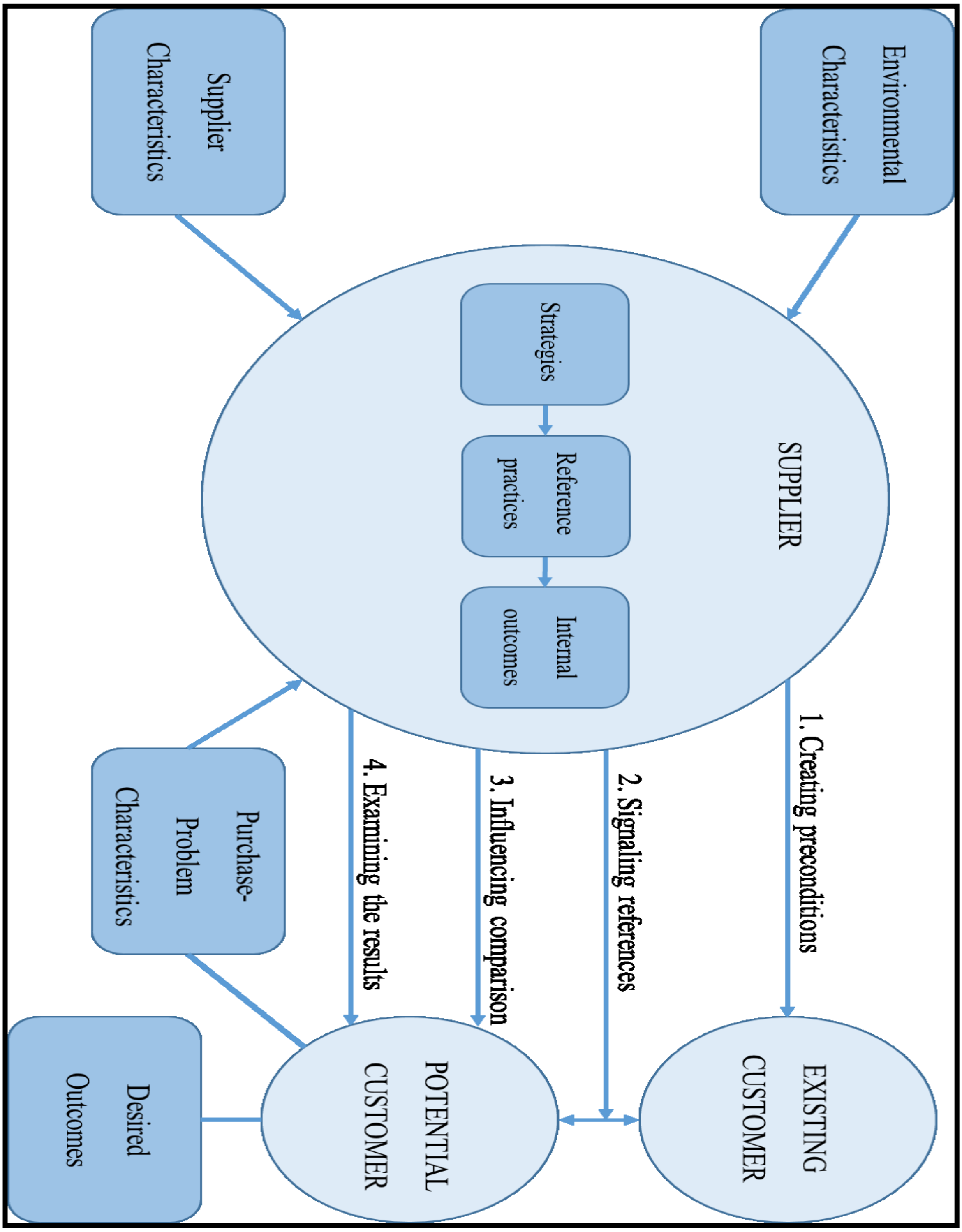
Reference cases can also be communicated verbally. Verbal communication of customer references refers to potential buyers gaining opinions, evaluations, and advice directly from the established customer (Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola, 2013). This method includes word-of-mouth, referrals, and recommendations (ibid.). Customer references can even be physical sites where potential customers are brought on a reference visit to see an established customer relationship and see the product/service offering in action (Salminen & Möller, 2006; Kumar, Petersen, & Leone, 2013). This direct contact allows potential customers to interact with the supplier's current customers and hear their experiences firsthand (Brashear-Alejandro et al., 2011; Aarikka-Stenroos & Makkonen, 2014). Once again, this highlights the significance of reference cases providing evidence of a beneficial buyer-supplier relationship.

The definitions and ways of communicating customer reference cases allude to how reference cases provide evidence of the buyer-supplier relationship. In the business-to-business realm, it is important that suppliers can capitalize on their ability to create positive outcomes and a positive experience with the customer (Terho & Jalkala, 2017). For this reason, it can be deduced that reference case utilization is a method of highlighting the outcomes and experience a supplier provides its customers. The relationship between the supplier, established customer, and potential customer should be investigated to further understand how customer references fit into the triad.

2.2. Reference case utilization

Researchers Salminen and Möller constructed a theoretical framework to detail the utilization of reference cases (Salminen & Möller, 2006). The 'Simplified reference model' is considered the first concrete example of how a supplier utilizes customer references in practice (Anderson & Wynstra, 2010). The model is reproduced below in Figure 1. This model is considered in this literature review because it provides insight into the goals and practices for a supplier's customer reference utilization. This aligns with the goal of this thesis research, which is to describe how the chosen case company utilizes customer reference cases in its sales operations. This reference model was chosen because it is the only model available that describes the phenomenon of reference case utilization and the dynamic between the supplier, existing customer, and potential customer. It was chosen in order to explain the findings of customer reference utilization at David Health Solutions. To understand the model's connection to the topic of this thesis, the different parts are analyzed. This includes the actors, internal and external factors, and the four phases of customer referencing.

Figure 1: Simplified reference model (Salminen & Möller, 2006)



The theoretical framework includes three actors shown in the light blue circles. These are the supplier, the existing customer, and the potential customer. In the model, the supplier utilizes its relationship with the existing customer as a reference case to target the potential customer, and hopefully generate a business relationship with this interested buyer. This model does not specify the type of reference case utilized so it can be assumed that any format, whether through sales tools or verbal communication, adheres to the method. According to Salminen and Möller, this utilization is dependent on several factors, both internal and external.

The internal and external factors of the model are shown in dark blue rectangles. The internal factors that affect reference case utilization are the supplier's strategies and practices for using reference cases. The supplier's growth strategy and target group signaling affect the reference practices it adheres to. These practices range from using references internally in the form of a database for example, or externally in reference visits, promotional material, and the Internet. The internal use seeks to improve targeting of bidding efforts and salesperson training, whereas external use seeks to target the potential customers. Both internal and external reference use affect the supplier's internal outcomes such as sales organization's performance or the cost/pricing accuracy of bids to potential customers.

The external factors refer to environmental characteristics, supplier characteristics, and purchase-problem characteristics. Environmental characteristics are aspects such as the supplier's home country image and the market's competition intensity. Salminen and Möller conclude that if the home country's image is poor in relation to the given industry and the market is highly competitive, then customer references are more imperative. Supplier characteristics refer to the seller's size, phase of internationalization, and reputation. Here, a smaller, less international, and less reputable supplier may reap more benefits from using customer reference cases.

The purchase-problem characteristics are situational and depend on the potential customer. The factors are broken down into product-related and supplier-related. The product-related factors allude to the importance, complexity, familiarity, purchasing frequency, and innovativeness of the supplier's product offering. The supplier-related factors that the potential customer considers are familiarity, dependence, and depth of interaction. If a potential customer is familiar with the supplier, there is little dependency or interaction and the product is unimportant, then the effect of reference cases decreases. However, the effect increases when a potential customer is highly dependent on the supplier and the product is highly innovative and complex.

The fourth factor depicted in the Simplified reference model alludes to the external desired outcomes of a supplier's utilization of customer references. These outcomes relate directly to the potential customer's perception of the supplier in question. Three of the desired outcomes are to increase the perceived competence, credibility, and reputation of the supplier. The fourth outcome is to reduce the perceived purchasing risk. With these outcomes fulfilled, it is possible a buyer-supplier relationship begins. However, a phased approach must be considered to understand how this happens in practice.

The reference model includes four phases of reference case utilization that occur between the supplier, existing customer, and potential buyer. In the first phase, the supplier creates preconditions with the existing customer to begin a reference relationship. In the second phase, the reference customer is signaled to the interested buyer. As discussed previously, the purpose of this signaling is to provide evidence of the supplier's capability to deliver. In the third phase, the supplier wants to influence the potential customer's comparison standards by organizing reference visits, for example. In the final phase, the seller actively inquires effects of the referencing approach from the prospective buyer, creating a feedback loop. If the outcome is positive and a purchase is made, then the supplier may target the new customer in phase 1 to initiate a new reference customer relationship. In a negative outcome, the supplier should analyze the process and possibly update the plan for the next sales situation. The researchers note that in order for this approach to be successful with a potential customer, there needs to be mutual trust and commitment as well as a mutually satisfying business relationship present (Salminen & Möller, 2006).

The Simplified reference model provides a starting point for understanding customer reference utilization because it considers the relationship between the three actors, the external and internal characteristics worth considering, and the practices and processes at play. This helps create understanding as to how a supplier utilizes customer references in their own operations, creating both a connection with the existing buyer and the potential customer. However, the model considers reference case utilization at a surface level. One major downfall of the Simplified reference model is that it is the only suggested approach for customer referencing, making it difficult to take at face value. Other academics have mentioned this phased approach (Kumar, Petersen, & Leone, 2013; Terho & Jalkala, 2017), but have failed to provide critique or improvement suggestions. In order to understand the different facets of this model, other academic research is taken into consideration to complete the understanding of the phenomenon. Recent academic literature considers the purpose and objectives of customer reference utilization more in-depth.

2.3. Purpose and objectives of reference utilization

Academic research highlights several reasons suppliers utilize reference cases. According to Salminen and Möller, a supplier signals a reference case to the potential customer in order to "increase the chances of a new supplier relationship by influencing positively the perceived competence, credibility, and reputation of the supplier and thus reduce the perceived risk of the buyer (Salminen & Möller, 2006 p. 37). This describes several objectives as to why a supplier uses reference cases in sales situations. Research has built on this notion in a bid to provide more understanding to the underlying purpose reference cases have in sales operations. These objectives can be categorized as short-term and long-term.

The short-term objectives of reference utilization relate to decreasing the buyer's perceived worries and establishing supplier credibility. Not only do potential customers want to purchase from a credible and trustworthy seller, they also want to reduce any risk surrounding the purchasing decision (Salminen & Möller, 2006; Helm & Salminen, 2010). The need to reduce the prospective customer's perceived risk of purchase is strong when there is strong ambiguity and uncertainty regarding the seller's performance (Anderson & Wynstra, 2010) and if the supplier's offering is high in price and complexity (Jalkala & Salminen, 2010; Hada, Grewal, & Lilien, 2014). It has been concluded that when there is a high perceived risk on the prospective customer's side, those in the decision-making position carefully consider the previous achievements of the seller (Stuart, Hoang & Hybels, 1998; Kumar, Petersen, & Leone, 2013). Through these claims, it can be inferred that presenting successful reference cases can lower the perceived risk that the potential customer may be experiencing.

Reference cases can also decrease a buyer's ambiguity surrounding the supplier's offering. Qualitative research was conducted on how customers make purchasing decisions in higher-value, higher-price offerings in business markets (Anderson & Wynstra, 2010). This is of direct relevance to the case company as the product offering is the priciest on the market and positions itself as the one offering the most value. The study focused on two constructs, which are ambiguity, defined in the study as doubt of superior value, and the outcomes of obtaining superior value from the offering. The findings conclude that utilizing customer references proved to be as effective as conducting a pilot program with the potential buyer. Both are equally reputable in terms of 'value evidence' for the interested buyer. This is interesting in the fact that simply showing that a competitor uses the offering has the same positive effect as if the supplier were to run a more costly pilot program directly with the potential buyer.

The research also highlights the importance of the status of the reference customer, and that they should be respected within the field (Anderson & Wynstra, 2010). This hints at a possible prerequisite for what makes a useful reference case. It has been stated that if the existing customer is not reputable among others on the market, it may not provide the same positive effect (ibid.). This is discussed more in-depth in the subsequent section on the factors affecting customer reference utilization. In addition to decreasing ambiguity, reference cases also offer evidence of 'proof of concept' of the supplier's offering.

Reference cases provide potential customers with information on the typical type of customer the supplier works with and "the long-term benefits and impacts of the solution (Aarikka-Stenroos & Makkonen, 2014 p. 348). Buyers use these references to gain an understanding of how the buyer's solution can fit their own operations and what benefits can be achieved (Salminen & Möller, 2006). In addition to this, buyers are also interested in learning about how other buyers experienced the interaction and relationship with the supplier (Salminen & Möller, 2006; Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola, 2013).

The long-term objective of reference case utilization links to building a trustworthy relationship and increasing the buyer's perceived credibility of the supplier. Business-to-business markets usually place a strong significance on relationship building between the supplier and buyer (Viio & Grönroos, 2014). This is because the buyer and supplier in a business-to-business relationship usually have long-term commitments to one another, where continual communication occurs (ibid.). In order to establish a strong relationship, several criteria must be met. For this, customer reference cases can help to ensure the credibility of the seller's offering as it provides evidence that the product offering is functional (Salminen & Möller, 2006). This includes building trust and credibility between the two parties, as it is important that the prospective buyer trusts that the supplier and its offering are legitimate and operational (Kumar, Petersen, & Leone, 2013; Viio & Grönroos, 2014). This is important in situations where the seller's offering is technological and operational uncertainty is present (Salminen & Möller, 2006; Anderson & Wynstra, 2010). Establishing credibility relates directly to the short-term objectives by providing evidence of the offering's functionality and reducing buyer's perceived risk.

Suppliers utilize customer reference cases as evidence for their competence to deliver on promises and as proof of concept. In addition, these reference cases help decrease perceived risk on the buyers' side. The perceived risk is heightened in highly complex and technological product offerings. These short-term objectives build on the long-term objective of customer reference utilization, which is to cultivate a new, prosperous buyer-supplier relationship with the interested customer. When a supplier can decrease the prospective buyer's perceived uncertainty, ambiguity and risk relating to a transaction, then the firm has created a closer connection with the interested customer. As noted in academic research, suppliers may utilize reference cases to try to clear the air of doubt on the prospective buyer's side so that the purchasing firm would take the supplier's offering at face value.

2.4. Factors affecting reference utilization

The Simplified reference model details the environmental, supplier, and purchase-problem characteristics related to customer reference utilization (Salminen & Möller, 2006). These include market characteristics, product-related conditions, and supplier-related considerations. Recent academic literature has expanded this discussion to include more factors that affect the supplier's utilization of customer reference cases. These factors include mutual trust, common ground and the media formats used to communicate reference cases.

Mutual trust in the buyer-supplier relationship must be present for a supplier to be able to utilize a customer as a reference case. It is commonly accepted that the featured customer in the reference case is willing to share their experiences for no monetary reward (Anderson & Wynstra, 2010; Aarikka-Stenroos & Makkonen, 2014). The mutual trust stems from the supplier gaining consent from the existing customer to use information to create a reference case (Salminen & Möller, 2006). It can be concluded that mutual trust is even more vital when the supplier offers a potential customer the opportunity to call or visit the customer reference, or any other opportunity where direct contact between the interested and existing customer occurs.

A research study focused on how and to what extent customer references influence prospective buyers (Kumar, Petersen & Leone, 2013). The researchers' multi-method approach provides insight into what role reference cases play in the buyer's decision-making process and how suppliers in a higher-value, higher-price market should utilize their reference case portfolio. One discovery points directly to the notion of common ground between reference customer and prospective buyer. The executives interviewed for the study suggested that the customer references that proved to be the most valuable in influencing the purchasing decision of the potential buyer, had the highest similarity to the interested customer. The researchers concluded that it is substantially influential to show a potential customer a similar company in the customer reference case, in order to provide the most suitable and persuasive evidence that an offering works. These similarities can stem from being in the same industry, same job function, or same need for a given set of products and/or services (ibid.). This makes it easier for the interested customer to envision the supplier's solution in the firm's own operations, as there are points of commonality to use (Salminen & Möller, 2006; Aarikka-Stenroos & Makkonen, 2014).

The research also concludes that the supplier only needs to present a few key customer references (Kumar, Petersen & Leone, 2013). However, the chosen customer references should have similar characteristics with the prospective customer in order to positively influence the prospect's decision to purchase. Product/service congruency in a presented reference case is the factor that has the largest effect of increasing the chances that a potential customer adopts the buyer's solution (Kumar, Petersen & Leone, 2013; Hada, Grewal & Lilien, 2014). This means a supplier can focus on collecting a handful of key customer references, rather than trying to make every current customer into a reference case. On the other hand, this in fact increases the need for a diverse portfolio of customer reference cases, when the supplier has potential customers in varying industries and markets.

As mentioned previously, customer reference cases can be presented in sales tools or through verbal communication. In addition, cases can contain various combinations of information from data, statistics, and quotations, to pictures and videos. This causes an issue as to how a firm should present the customer reference case in a given situation. The academic discussion on choosing of a media format is very limited, however a few key considerations emerge. Several studies investigate this concept, but at a secondary level to the research's primary function. For example, in the research relating to the extent customer referencing influences prospective buyers, it was concluded that the reference media format is in fact an important driver as to how valuable the customer referencing is (Kumar, Petersen, & Leone, 2013).

Researchers Kumar, Petersen, and Leone conclude that richer media formats are more influential and that a single customer reference case is more beneficial than asking a prospect to call a current customer (ibid.). It is important to define the meaning of richer media formats to understand the impact of this. The richer media formats refer to video and audio testimonials (Venkatesan & Kumar, 2004) "...because they are perceived to have more valuable information content, convey a greater effort by the firm to communicate with the consumer, and potentially provide a more customizable opinion from the client" (Kumar, Petersen, & Leone, 2013, p. 72). The 'less rich' media formats include written testimonials, case studies, and white paper reports (Venkatesan & Kumar, 2004). This issue of media format is important to consider when deciding how to present customer reference cases to prospective customers. Since there seems to be no structured approach as to doing this in practice, it can be inferred that this process is the supplier's task to create. This problem of process development is also apparent in the use of reference cases through verbal communication.

A supplier may bring the interested customer on a reference visit where direct contact and/or observation occurs with the existing buyer (Aarikka-Stenroos & Makkonen, 2014). Here the interested customer can gain better access to opinions, evaluation of the price-quality ratio, and the customer's personal experiences with the buyer and purchased solution (ibid.). In fact, Aarikka-Stenroos and Makkonen found that interested customers valued reference visits over reference lists and referrals because the visits “convey accurate information on functionality and technical details, and the reference work itself is observable” (Aarikka-Stenroos & Makkonen, 2014, p. 349). Although there is value in these verbal communication forms of reference cases, they are not able to offer the same kind of sensitive user information as referrals, advice, and word-of-mouth can (Aarikka-Stenroos & Makkonen, 2014). This highlights a limit that reference cases have. Although a reference visit may allow a prospective buyer direct access to interact with the existing customer, the supplier is still the facilitator of this interaction. Therefore, the interested buyer may be wary of possible supplier influence. The research notes that the interested customer may have more trust in information that is obtained directly from a third-party source (ibid.). However, reference visits can offer suppliers a close option to this because of the lower degree of control and influence the supplier has in the situation.

Reference visits take on a heightened importance in high-technology markets where both market and technical uncertainty are high. In this context, researchers Salminen and Möller propose that reference cases utilize ‘reference installations’ for three main reasons (Salminen & Möller, 2006). First, a successful reference installation allows the supplier to be certain that the high-tech product is functional. In addition, it offers the opportunity for the supplier to demonstrate the technology to the interested buyer. Lastly, it helps the buyer overcome potential psychological switching costs by proving the supplier’s capability and commitment to the product.

Several factors affect a supplier’s utilization of customer references. For a supplier to utilize an existing customer as a reference case there needs to be mutual trust present. Then, the supplier should present the existing customer with reference cases that share common ground. Now the supplier must choose the most suitable method with which to communicate the customer reference to the interested buyer. These factors allude to the buyer-supplier relationship, which a supplier seeks to create with the prospective buyer, using customer references. For one, the presence of trust between established buyer and supplier can help convince the prospective buyer that the co-operation is a positive experience and that there is a beneficial relationship present. The trust is also demonstrated through reference cases that share commonalities, because the interested customer can see how the product offering may fit the firm’s own operations (Aarikka-Stenroos & Makkonen, 2014; Hada, Grewal & Lilien, 2014). Now, if the supplier can bring the prospective customer to an existing customer on a reference visit, then the trust increases. Here, the interested buyer can see the offering and supplier-buyer relationship in action and may even be able to directly interact with the established customer. A few details must be in order for this experience to have a positive outcome for the supplier. The supplier must trust that the established customer is a trustworthy source in the eyes of the potential customer. Moreover, the interaction should shed a positive light on the supplier’s product/service offering as well as the business relationship present.

Overall, the academic discussion regarding factors affecting customer reference utilization alludes to the underlying fact that customer references play a key role in displaying the supplier-buyer relationship to prospective customers. The factors of mutual trust, common ground, and media format choice all affect how a supplier should utilize customer references with the interested buyer. These factors will in turn affect the interested customer’s opinion of the supplier, and whether or not the potential customer wants to build a relationship with the supplier.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

This section provides insight into the design and methodology of the empirical research. It serves to summarize and justify the chosen methods. The methodology is designed to describe the phenomenon of how David Health Solutions utilizes customer reference cases. A phenomenon-based approach affects the research design in that it serves to describe and explain a certain phenomenon with a defined context (Van Krogh, Rossi-Lamastra, & Haefliger, 2012). For this reason, I chose the case study approach because it is used in empirical research to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context (Yin, 2014). The case study approach includes several choices to be made including its structure and focus. The qualitative data collection provides direct access to the chosen target group and the means to collect information on customer reference utilization. This section concludes with an evaluation of the validity and reliability of this research.

3.1. Research process

The table below illustrates the research process in chronological order. The process began in January 2019 when I received approval from David Health Solutions to use them as my case company for this thesis. During this ideation process, several ad-hoc discussions were held with internal management to understand what topics would be beneficial to the company's operations. After this, the research proposal and design phase began alongside the interview process. The interview numbers correspond to the interview data in Table 2, which is provided in the data collection section. The literature review began in March, with browsing of academic literature but the targeted literature research was completed after the analysis process due to the exploratory and inductive nature of this thesis.

Table #1: Research process timetable

January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August
Thesis ideation	Research proposal and design						
		Literature review					
	Interviews #1-2						
		Interviews #3-10					
			Interviews #10-12				
			Data analysis				
					Discussion and assessment		

3.2. Qualitative research

Upon careful reflection, I decided that a qualitative research approach is the best fit for my research question because it aims to describe a certain phenomenon that occurs in its real-life situation (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). A quantitative study would not be suitable for this research because it mainly aims to define meanings and test hypotheses (Blumberg, Cooper & Schindler, 2008). For this reason, I believe a quantitative approach would not yield enough descriptive information as to how the sales organization utilizes these customer reference cases in practice. Since the proposed research question aims at describing the phenomenon with a 'how' question, a qualitative approach is the most suitable to providing definitions and explanations for the research subject (Bell, Bryman, & Harley, 2018). Before identifying the type of qualitative research, I will define the philosophical positioning of this study.

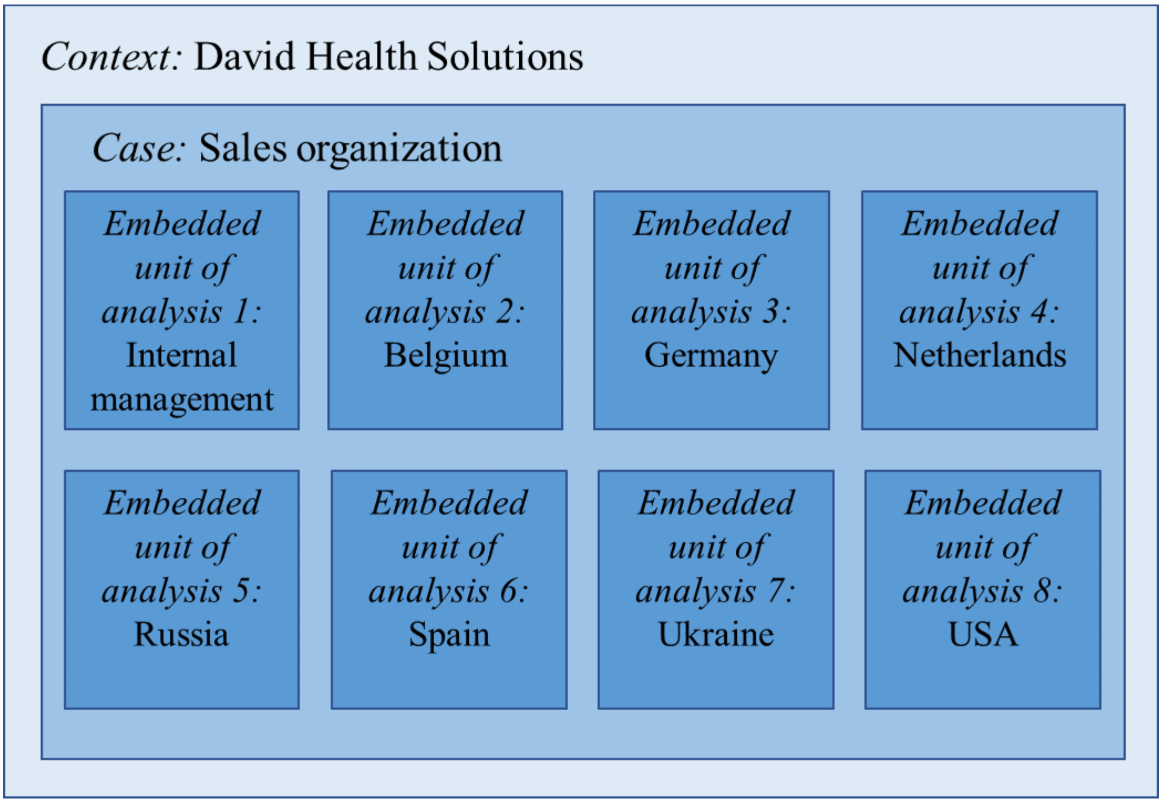
When conducting qualitative research, it is important for the researcher to define the epistemological and ontological positioning in order to clarify the extent of scholarly contribution to the phenomenon in question (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015; Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2018). For this qualitative research study, I will be taking a critical realism approach. Critical realism aims to identify structures that appear (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2018). This approach is similar to positivism in that both acknowledge an observable world that is independent from human consciousness (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2015). However, critical realism is inherently different from a positivist approach because it is not empirical in nature and so perceptions are not based on sense-making (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2018). My research question correlates well with this factual-based approach because my objective is to describe the phenomenon as it appears, rather than allow for perceptions and feelings to influence the research.

3.2.1. Descriptive, embedded single-case study

The case study approach is the best fit for my research question. A few key considerations help to solidify this choice. For one, it is important to understand what environment is most suitable for a case study method. Researcher Yin states that a case study is appropriate when a 'how' or 'why' question "…is being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control." (Yin, 2014, p.9). This thesis focuses on a single-case study approach because there is only one case company in question, David Health Solutions. It should be noted that a single-case study can be 'holistic' where the overall organization is considered, or 'embedded' which considers sub-units within the organization (Scholz & Tietje, 2002; Yin, 2014). This is an important aspect of the research design of a case study.

The research follows an embedded approach because the data is collected from several distributors who all operate separately, so there will be several different sources of data to analyze. These sales distributors are chosen based on their categorization by the top management at David Health Solutions. According to the company's Sales Director, first-tier distributors receive this status from being having established sales within their country or region and fulfill technical and educational training requirements. These first-tier sales distributors are the focus of the empirical research and form the embedded units within the single-case study.

Figure #2: Embedded context of case study



The image above provides an illustrative description of how my research forms an embedded single-case study. Researcher Yin details the structure of an embedded single-case study and describes the three main components (2014). The first refers to the context that makes up what is being investigated. The single case is within this research context, and for this thesis, is the sales organization of David Health Solutions. Finally, within this case there are embedded sub-units that are analyzed separately yet form the single case. The first embedded unit of analysis represents the internal management of David Health Solutions, followed by the seven of the company's first-tier distribution markets.

Another important consideration for case-study research is the purpose and how it affects the approach taken. Yin defines three different approaches including exploratory, explanatory, and descriptive (2017). The descriptive method aims to describe a phenomenon within the defined context (ibid.) and is the chosen approach for this research because the goal is to describe how the sales organization utilizes customer reference cases rather than look for casual relationships or develop hypotheses. In addition, the research is inductive, meaning possible definitions and theories are drawn from the observations made (Bell, Bryman, & Harley, 2018). An inductive approach is most fitting for the research question because it aims to describe the phenomenon rather than explore any underlying theory behind reference case utilization. These considerations have narrowed the qualitative research design into a descriptive, embedded single-case study.

3.3. Qualitative data collection

This section provides insight into how the qualitative data was collected for this investigation. In a phenomenon-based case study approach, the collected data serves to describe and explain the phenomenon as it occurs within the context (Van Krogh, Rossi-Lamastra, & Haefliger, 2012). First, the semi-structured interview method is described. In order to understand the phenomenon, interviewees were chosen based on their knowledge and experience with selling the DAVID Solution. In order to understand a defined context in a study, it is important for interviewees to have experience from the same sales situation (Johnston & Lewin, 1996).

3.3.1. Semi-structured interviews

The primary data collection method for my research is conducting interviews. Interviews are not only a very common qualitative research method but also the prevailing data collection method for case study research (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2018). In qualitative research, specifically case studies, it has been argued that unstructured and semi-structured are the main structural process for interviews (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2018) In a semi-structured approach the interviewer has an outline of topics and questions, but that the order and proceeding questions are flexible (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). A semi-structured approach is more informal and can become more individualized to the interviewee's answers, but still allows the interviewer to maintain focus on specific issues (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2018). The semi-structured approach was chosen in order to keep the interviews informal and open, however preserve focus on the key issues of customer reference cases and sales meetings. This was done with the help of interview guides.

An interview guide helps to prepare for the semi-structured interviews because it highlights key discussion topics, yet still allows for conversational flexibility in order to understand the interviewee's individual thoughts (Blumberg, Cooper & Schindler, 2008). The main topics that define the interview guides for both internal management and sales distributors include ‘introduction of the interviewee’, ‘sales operations and meetings’, ‘customer reference cases’, and ‘future outlook of operations’. Each topic includes 1-5 guiding questions. These topics were told to the interviewee before the interview began in conjunction with information on the purpose of the interview, right to withdraw information, and their right to anonymity. The interviews took approximately 45 minutes and were done through Skype or face-to-face. The interview guide for interviews with David Health Solutions’ internal management can be found in Appendix 1, and the guide for interviews with distributors in Appendix 2.

3.3.2. Interview process

The interviews were done with chosen representatives from the case company’s top and middle management as well as the international sales distribution network. These interviewees are chosen because they have direct knowledge and/or experience of customer reference utilization in selling the DAVID offering. Four interviews were conducted with internal management. The interviews chosen for this research follow a snowballing method because the case company’s CEO/Founder and Sales Director, the first two interviewees, gave the key names of who to interview within the company as well as the distributor network. The snowball sampling method works well for this exploratory research because the first two informants were able to provide other key actors within the targeted context (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). As a result, eight interviews were conducted with the firm’s distributor partners.

The remaining interviews focused on the international sales distribution network. As discussed previously, seven first-tier distribution channels were chosen for this research. Two representatives were interviewed from both the German market and the combined market of Belgium & Netherlands. This is due to the fact that both of these distribution partners have a larger market presence and higher number of salespeople. Although the Russian and Spanish markets are quite mature and have significant sales records, the distribution partner has one key salesperson for the DAVID Solution offering, and therefore I deemed it sufficient to interview only this key person in both markets. Meanwhile, the Ukrainian and USA markets are new to the first-tier distribution list and therefore experience in sales situations is limited. For this reason, it was concluded to be enough to interview only one person from these distribution partners. Information on all of the interviewees is provided below and includes the dates the individual interviews occurred.

Table #2: Interview data

Date	Type/Country	Interviewee title
20.2.2019	*Internal* top management	CEO/Founder
26.2.2019	*Internal* top management	Sales Director
1.3.2019	*Distributor* Russia	Managing Director
5.3.2019	*Distributor* Spain	Director
5.3.2019	*Distributor* Belgium & Netherlands	Managing Director
6.3.2019	*Distributor* Ukraine	Customer Service Representative
21.3.2019	*Distributor* USA	CEO
22.3.2019	*Distributor* Germany	Key Account Manager
26.3.2019	*Distributor* Netherlands	Country Manager
26.3.2019	*Internal* top management	COO
2.4.2019	*Internal* middle management	Marketing Manager
18.4.2019	*Distributor* Germany	Key Account Salesperson

3.3.3. Secondary data sources

The other data source utilized in the research includes sales presentations and material from the sales distributors. These are secondary data sources because these published texts and materials are used as 'artefacts' of information (Belk, Fischer & Kozinets, 2013). It is a popular technique used in qualitative business research (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). I collected this material by asking each interviewee if they are willing to send me sales material they utilize in sales meetings. The amount of secondary data is dependent on this willingness, and I received sales material from six of the distributor markets in total. This consists of eight sales presentations and five PDF brochures.

3.4. Data analysis

This section provides a discussion on the data analysis method that proceeds the data collection process. The chosen method is qualitative thematic analysis, which indicates how the researcher analyzes the data by identifying common threads and themes (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). Moreover, these themes are uncovered through a process of coding the data into these defined topics (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2018). These themes help formulate answers to my research question as well as the supporting sub-questions.

Qualitative thematic analysis is an analysis approach where the researcher searches and identifies common threads and themes within the interviews (Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas, 2013). In relation to this, Eriksson and Kovalainen note that it is beneficial for a novice researcher to start with the categorization and description of the data and then move on to interpreting and analyzing the data (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). The coding process is an important part of my thematic data analysis process, as it uncovers and defines certain themes from the interviews (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2018). I used an inductive approach to the thematic coding because I am not linking my research directly to previous theory and so the coded categories are derived directly from the transcribed interview transcripts (Hseih & Shannon, 2005).

After the interviews were conducted, I began the data analysis process by sifting through the internal management interview transcripts. I carefully read each interview transcript several times. From here, I began to code the data into separate topics and concepts. Then, I looked for themes and categorized the codes into these key themes. I created a spreadsheet where I organized the thematic categories and what was said by which interviewee. From here, I reviewed the themes carefully by naming and defining them. This helps to build a cohesive story from the data. The same inductive coding process was conducted for the distributor interviews. Although similar codes and themes appeared, the analyses were kept independent of each other. In the following chapter, these themes are discussed and the two different viewpoints, internal management and distributor network, are brought together to describe the findings.

3.5. Reliability and validity

The limitations and ethical concerns that arise from this thesis research relate directly to the methodology approach chosen and my relation to the case company. Therefore, they should be carefully considered in order to understand the degree of validity and reliability of the research.

The research includes a data set that has been solely obtained from one source, the sales organization at David Health Solutions. This significant limitation is worth noting. Furthermore, one ethical concern that deals directly with the case study approach of this research is the overall generalizability of the findings. A major limitation of case study research is the fact that they provide very little opportunity for generalization (Yin, 2014). This stands true for a single-case approach, which is the chosen method for this research. The lack in generalizability should be considered when formulating conclusions from the collected data. Therefore, suggestions for future research could include the use of more companies in a multiple-case study, different markets, or a focus on the customer's side of reference case utilization.

A few limitations that also spark ethical concerns are directly related to the data collection methods chosen for this research study. Although conducting interviews provides a firsthand understanding of key actors' viewpoints there are still limitations present. For one, there may be human-biased interaction at play that can limit the reliability of the data collection. Issues such as reflexivity or bias are ethical concerns taken into consideration as possible limitations of data reliability and validity (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2018). During the data collection process, leading and biased questions were averted. When analyzing the interview data, it is important to remain objective, and take the data at face value. There is heightened importance in remaining objective throughout the research process due to my direct connection to the case company.

4. FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of the empirical research conducted for this thesis. The findings are divided into sub-sections which discuss the prevailing themes found in the data analysis of the interviews conducted with David Health Solutions' internal management and international distributor partners. The data from internal management is mainly used to introduce the topics, provide the firm's history and current outlook on the topics. The interview data from distributors provides information on their opinions and approaches to utilizing customer references in sales of the David Health Solutions product and service offering.

The overarching objectives of the data are to answer the research question and describe how David Health Solutions' sales organization utilizes customer reference cases. This includes answering the sub-questions of how the case company's distributor network utilizes customer reference cases in sales. This is what the findings consider first. Then, the discussion continues with how these cases are communicated within the case company's international sales organized through sales material and other media. To elaborate on this, the theme of customer reference visits is considered, followed by what is discussed regarding sales meetings. The findings section concludes with opinions relating to sales processes development, followed by a summary of the findings.

4.1. Customer reference cases

The use of reference cases is discussed in each conducted interview. This refers to reference cases in the form of customer/client testimonials, reference lists, and media material from customers. The use of reference visits is omitted from this section and is discussed in the proceeding one.

Discussion with the internal management at David Health Solutions provides insight into the history of using customer references. The consensus is that reference cases have not been utilized in marketing and sales operations until just recently. In lieu of customer references, internal management has focused on the scientific evidence in the form of independent studies conducted using the devices. However, there is a shared viewpoint that these stories should be utilized in sales efforts and brought to the public.

> “*We should be in contact with customers and find these miracle stories that show the human side of what it is we do. We’re selling technology and devices, but our customers are people, not machines.”* (CEO, internal)

> *“We need more reference cases. It’s important to note that in the beginning we did not have any cases in our marketing efforts. Lately it’s been better. We have these great customer stories from around the world from where we can collect information and stories.”* (Marketing manager, internal)

The case company’s international distributors openly discuss the cases they use within their markets. There is a difference between established markets, that have many device installations, and new markets that have fewer installations. In the German, Russian, Belgian and Dutch markets, the overall awareness and saturation of DAVID devices are high. In these markets, the distributors use local customer references that the potential customers are familiar with. These claims are supported by the information within their sales presentations. The presentations include direct references to local clinic chains, doctors, and hospitals utilizing the David technology. On the other hand, distributors in the USA, Ukrainian, and Spanish markets do not specify what reference cases they used. These markets have fewer local installations.

> *“I use the case of a local coal mining company with all Russian clients because it is a company that they know.”* (Managing director, Russia)

> *“I discuss the most common references in the Netherlands that everybody knows and can immediately recognize.”* (Country manager, Netherlands)

The distribution partners also discuss the benefits of having customer reference cases. All of the distributors mention using customer stories, and a few highlight the importance of sharing these stories with interested buyers. They believe that potential customers are interested in learning about these reference customers. However, two of the interviewees note that reference cases are not the ultimate decisive factors for interested buyers.

> "*People listen and dig into these…they want to have more information…they are not the decision factors, they are not what really closes the deals, but of course personal stories have an impact.*" (Managing director, Russia)

> "*The more, the better…It's difficult to say how helpful the cases are but when you talk to a client you mostly talk theoretical and there you can talk practically because you can show real-life examples. Client or clinic testimonials – it's probably one of the best arguments and best sales tools you can have, you can relate the story of a client to another client.*" (Managing director, Belgium and Netherlands)

In general, David Health Solutions' internal management and the distributor network agree that there is a benefit to utilizing customer reference cases. However, there are differing practices in how distributors showed reference cases in sales material. Furthermore, the internal operations at David Health Solutions do not have a strategic approach in place as to how customer reference should be utilized. Therefore, the distributors do not follow a uniform approach in utilizing customer reference cases in their sales material or presentations.

4.2. Customer reference visits

The utilization of customer reference visits is an extensively discussed theme. The theme comes up organically in the interviews. Since it is mentioned so frequently, it becomes its own topic, separate from the 'customer reference case' theme. Internal management interviewees voice their opinion that having a reference clinic to bring potential customers should be an imperative requisite for distributor partners. These interviewees believe the use of customer reference visits is the best way to show the solution and its practical use.

> *"We are discussing with people from the medical rehabilitation side, so they need to be shown that this has outcomes. We have to show that the system someone takes into use actually works in practice."* (COO, internal)

> *"There is a number of quality partners that we send people, potential distributors or potential customers to see what (the clinic) is doing so they can understand the implementation of the solutions"* (Sales director, internal)

With the distributors, customer reference visits ware unanimously considered to be the best form of reference case utilization. The main reasons for bringing interested buyers to reference clinics are to show them how the devices operate in a clinic setting and to provide the opportunity for interested customers to experience the technology.

> *"We have to explain the devices with the help of the devices themselves. You have to feel these devices because the biomechanics is something special."* (Key account salesperson, Germany)

> "(Prospective customers) *are more interested when they can see how it actually works and they can better understand what we have been talking about regarding the devices and technology."* (Customer service representative, Ukraine)

> *"Often the only way for us to strike a deal is for our customers to physically experience the devices…and by wowed by the biofeedback. It's practically impossible to sell the devices without this."* (CEO, USA)

All eight of the distributor interviewees utilize reference visits, whether at their own private showroom or by visiting an existing customer's clinic. However, the approaches vary from different considerations. One distributor brings an interested buyer to the location that is nearest where the potential customer is situated (Customer service representative, Ukraine). Another distributor brings interested buyers to a clinic that has over 20 devices because it shows the potential patient volume capacity (CEO, USA). One considers the layout of the clinic and how it can appeal to the needs of the interested buyer (Country manager, Netherlands).

In scenarios when it is possible to arrange, all of the distributors allow the reference clinic's owners and physiotherapists to discuss directly with the interested buyer during the reference visit. A few of the distributors note that this possibility depends on the clinic personnel's availability at the time of the visit, as they did not pre-arrange anything with the clinic's staff. All of the interviewees believe this possibility to discuss with personnel at the reference clinic to have a significantly positive impact on the interested buyers. Two of these opinions are shared below.

> "*The best use of our time is to take them to a clinical environment where a therapist can show them the technology and explain"* (CEO, USA)

> "*It gives them the trust and gives them a good feeling to see that other practices are successful with the devices*." (Country manager, Netherlands)

An approach that stood out the most included a salesperson hiring two physiotherapists to spend up to one hour with the potential customers in a private consultation. The physiotherapists spend the time explaining and showing the rehabilitation devices and telling about their own experience with the solution.

> *"The physiotherapists tell them what they think of the devices, how they are working with them, how often they get errors and so on… (prospective customers) like to talk with someone who is not a salesperson."* (Country manager, Netherlands)

Another market utilizes a similar approach, where the distributor uses a specifically built reference clinic to show interested customers the DAVID Solution. However, rather than showing the technology himself, he implements the same strategy mentioned above and hires two physiotherapists to do the device presentation. The distributor believes this to have a positive effect because it builds trust and creates a relaxed environment for the potential customer.

> "*I invite two very good therapists who have dealt with the David machines for a very long time... most importantly they use the system every day because they are physiotherapists. It's a very good presentation they have because they can explain it without the salesperson effect…so customers are more relaxed.*" (Managing director, Russia)

Several of the distributors express the idea of allowing the potential customer to speak with someone who is not a salesperson. During these reference visits, the potential customer may bring along physiotherapists or doctors from their own operations. Therefore, distributors try to leverage this by having an interested clinic owner discuss directly with a clinic owner.

> "*We go to a customer who has 20 years' experience with David…I let the clinic owner speak to the customer. So, it is customer speaking to customer…he knows how to sell to his customers and so he does the same thing with our customers*." (Key Account manager, Germany)

> "*You can get doctors to talk to other doctors which is really great because you don't have to sell…you can let the doctor sell to the doctor*." (Managing director, Spain)

The significance of the reference clinic visits also led to feelings of urgency and expansion of reference locations for a couple of the distributor partners interviewed.

> "*We really need sites across the country where we can bring in people and they can discuss with the current user."* (CEO, USA)

> *"I am going to expand the Moscow showroom and maybe I am going to add another showroom somewhere in the middle of the country in Siberia, so that it will be logistically easier for these customers to visit*." (Managing director, Russia)

However, reference visits are not always possible and a couple of the distributors have therefore created alternative methods. One way of skirting around the need for a reference clinic visit is providing the prospective customer the opportunity to contact the reference customer directly. Of the ten distributors, only two mention providing a reference customer's contact information for the interested buyer to directly contact. In these cases, the distributor proposes the possibility of calling the current customer if it is too difficult to arrange a customer reference visit. The main problem with these arrangements is the long distance between the interested customer and the reference clinic. The additional benefit of this calling opportunity is equivocal because there is no feedback from the potential customers who have utilized it.

> "*I can give phone contacts and emails because I am very convinced that they are telling very good stories about David…I have only recently started the calling opportunity. I offer them this opportunity, but they probably don't use it or maybe do this secretly."* (Key account manager, Germany)

> *"We give them the opportunity to call up the customer…I think it has worked well on the few occasions we have used it for. There is no deal with this customer, he does this without any extra reward."* (CEO, USA)

The theme of potential customers speaking to current customer highlights an important selling tool. Many different arguments can be brought up in the sales meetings and discussions but there is an added value in allowing an interested customer to speak directly with one of David Health Solutions' current customers who is actively using the technology offering.

> *"The most powerful selling tool is always existing customers. The most powerful selling tool is if you send someone to a customer. You can talk about the medical arguments and economical arguments on paper but if you can send a potential customer to see hundreds of patients going through the system and seeing the results of this…and to see it in action and discuss with the clinic owner, then it is really proves the concept."* (Sales director, internal)

Aside from customer reference cases and visits, sales material is also discussed in the interviews.

4.3. Sales material

The use of sales material is discussed directly with the interviewees. Sales presentation and material are also collected as sources of secondary data. Some of the distributors have specific material that included customer references.

Customer reference cases are presented in varying ways in the physical sales material. The sales tools include reference lists of customer names and locations within the market, short quotes from clinic owners alongside pictures, videos of patient testimonials, and results of studies conducted with patients. In addition, all distributors mention the importance of utilizing the David Health Solutions official website, including the blog with customer stories.

> *"I show a reference list that shows the locations all over the Netherlands."* (Country manager, Netherlands)

> *"We have 2-3 brochures in Dutch and French that have some clients with a few sentences which says how they feel about the devices, and then pictures of the clinic or the person."* (Managing director, Belgium & Netherlands)

> "*We are using the latest blog articles by sending them to clients we are discussing with."* (Managing director, Belgium and Netherlands)

The distributor's own sales material is always in the local language. However, there is a different story for the customer stories shared on the David Health Solutions webpage. The distributors in Spain, the Ukraine, Germany, and Russia say they must translate these stories into their market's local language for the material to be useful and accessible to their readers.

> "*We use articles that we find on your official site and share them on our site in Ukrainian."* (Customer service representative, Ukraine)

The distributors utilize various forms of sales material, print to digital. This mainly includes printed material such as product catalogs and brochures, as well as digital material including PowerPoint presentations and videos. The sales material formats evoke strong opinions in the interviewees. Although several of the distributor utilize printed material, its usefulness is bleak.

> *"Not a lot of printed material to be honest, we mostly go digital."* (Managing director, Belgium and Netherlands)

> *"We have brochures which include the Ukrainian clinics. But for people, it is more interesting to see it in the electronic version than on printed paper."* (Customer service representative, Ukraine)

"In the case of printed material, I notice that they leave them on the desk. So, I lost trust in the printed material." (Managing director, Russia)

As the distributors rely more on digital material in sales efforts, it also becomes noticeable in the interviews that there is a growing need for more digital sales material. This sentiment comes up in each of the conducted interviews with the distributors. Some have devised plans to create local video material with existing customers and health care professionals, while others hope for support from the case company's internal organization. Videos are the most desired digital sales material by the distributors.

"A video is better than a presentation because you can see it live how the technology works". (Country manager, Netherlands)

"Videos work well. I have plans to make an educational video with customers in Russia. I also want experts like doctors talking in the videos." (Managing director, Russia)

"*We have a lot of videos that show patients talking about their experience with the technology…right now everyone wants to see videos."* (Managing director, Spain)

David Health Solutions produces marketing videos, which are primarily in English, detailing the technology and how the devices are used. The interviewed partners all utilize these marketing videos in sales operations. However, due to language barriers several of the distributors have had to translate the videos. This translation work is done simultaneously by the salesperson during the live showing of the video.

"We use the videos from David's official website and discuss what is happening in Ukrainian directly with the customer." (Customer service representative, Ukraine)

Only one distributor mentions a unique difficulty of presenting the marketing videos, which are in Finnish with English subtitles.

> *"Even if the video is in English, I can open the video and explain the parts of the video in German. But for the video that is in Finnish, it is difficult because the customers mostly only laugh at how funny the Finnish language sounds."* (Key account manager, Germany)

An interesting notion regarding social media as a format for sharing sales material comes up in the interviews. Internal management, most notably the CEO of the case company, sees social media as a useful tool for publishing sales material mainly in the form of customer references.

> "*This definitely changes everything now with using social media. These accounts really constantly demand these customers stories and allow us to make them public and known to the world."* (CEO, internal)

The distributors also voice the importance of social media presence in sharing sales material and creating interest. One distributor is keen on setting up their own social media channels as a way of campaigning to potential customers (Managing director, Belgium and Netherlands). In addition to social media, the importance of a strong online presence also coincides with this. One distributor mentions having an e-mail template with various links that he sends to prospective buyers (CEO, USA). All of the distributors share direct links to the case company's official website pages.

> "*The David website is like a permanently available exhibition for interested customers."* (Key account manager, Germany)

The new blog featured on the David Health Solutions' website is also mentioned. Most of the distributor partners feel that the blog's clinic stories and patient testimonials are useful in of sharing customer stories. However, one distributor did voice an opposing opinion.

> "*I think the stories are also working…it's a chance to see other customers from other countries. It's interesting these kinds of stories."* (Country manager, Netherlands)

> “*No one wants to read nowadays. A blog is old-fashioned.”* (Managing director, Spain)

Internal management at David Health Solutions is also keen to point out the significance of these customer stories. However, there is a shared notion that sales material provided by David Health Solutions needs to be developed further.

> "*I think the current approach we have with these blog articles is the best way to get the knowledge out there that this is an option…However we need to have material of the reference cases that salespeople can give to clients directly. Not just the social media presence.*" (Marketing manager, internal)

> *"Distributors are always asking us for good quality material. Always***.** *When I start working with a potential distributor…I have to give them a lot of support and a lot of information and I think if we have stuff that was more formally organized, it would be easier for them to get their head around them."* (Sales director, internal)

The need for more sales material is apparent in the conducted interviews with both the case company’s internal management as well as its distribution partners. This need for material correlates directly with the discussion and presentations that take place during sales meetings.

4.4. Sales meetings

Sales meetings are also extensively discussed in the interviews. The discussion includes hearing what and how internal management and distributors presented in sales meetings with prospective customers. The interviewees also extrapolate on what they saw as being useful knowledge to share with the interested buyers.

The case company's internal management interviewees discuss how sales meetings are done with prospective buyers. In sales meetings, all of the interviewees utilize a PowerPoint presentation, which goes over what they consider key components. This includes a brief history of the case company, its global reach, and what the product and service offering entails. The presentations themselves contain images of the devices as well as screenshots and marketing pictures of the service platform. It should be noted that sales meetings are mainly done in junction with a visit to a reference clinic. However, in the case of sales meetings during exhibitions, the prospective buyer is given a presentation with the physical devices brought to the show.

> "(The sales presentation is) *quite a general level of telling what our concept and solution is. We share the company history and show that it's an established concept used worldwide. And then we show the reference clinic here."* (COO, internal)

In addition, internal management shares its presentations with the company's sales distribution network. However, there is an evident problem relating to the usefulness of these presentations. One interviewee points to the fact that the sales presentation does not consider the person presenting or who the listener is.

> "*We share our sales presentations, so we have template presentations that reference some of the key success stories…but everyone's got their own presentations. I think it would be good to have them presented in a corporate way*." (Sales director, internal)

> "*They aren't made in a way that takes into consideration who the listener is. They are quite all over the place. It is too much attached to who the person is presenting than to the solution and concept."* (COO, internal)

In addition to this problem of sales presentations, there is a noticeable internal concern regarding what information the distributors share during sales meetings.

> *"It is a big downfall that we don't know what our distributors are telling at sales meetings. We don't know what they share or tell."* (CEO, internal)

> "*The whole concept is very dynamic and complex. The issue is how to present the solution in a way that makes sense to the customer. We need to have minimum requirements for what needs to be presented and discussed in sales meetings*." (COO, internal)

Sales distributors do not mention this lack of corporate support from David Health Solutions in relation to the sales meetings they have. In fact, several similarities arise in how distributors conduct sales meetings with prospective customers. Regarding information shared in the meetings, several of the distributors note the importance of the David Health Solutions' brand recognition, long history, as well as the company's strong international presence.

> *"They trust the brand here, so we tell them about the history and about what the company is doing all over the world."* (Customer service representative, Ukraine)

> "*I present the history, that helps a lot. I relate to the history, say what kind of partners have already bought David, what kind of assessments they have done about David.*" (Managing director, Russia)

> *"It helps to show that David has existed for a long period of time and that it has strong global presence*." (Country manager, Netherlands)

The most noteworthy similarity was previously explained and relates to the use of reference clinics to show the technology. This is believed to be a critical component to the sales meetings because of its usefulness in demonstrating the product and service offering directly to the prospective customer. Another similarity is the face-to-face approach in which the partners try to create a two-way dialogue with their clients.

> "*I always explain to the customer that they have to see and experience the devices in real life and that is why a face-to-face meeting must be arranged."* (Key account salesperson, Germany)

> "*I prefer to have at least an hour so I can present an official part. Then I can sit down and talk to them as a normal person, not a salesperson, and explain why David would be a good fit and answer their questions."* (Managing director, Russia)

Other than for product demonstration through a reference visit, there are a couple of key reasons why distributors want to create conversation with the prospective buyer in the sales meeting situations. As mentioned above, it provides the chance to answer questions from the prospective buyers. These questions mainly arise due to the hefty price of the case company's solution.

> "*The main issue with David is that the prices are out of reach for many people*." (Key account manager, Germany)

> "*It's such a challenging sell to sell these high-cost devices and software but they work, and they produce outcomes. But still the barrier to invest in this equipment is so high*." (CEO, USA)

"*The first thing they ask is the pricing, but we never give them the pricing first because we try to get them to visit us at the clinic.*" (Managing director, Spain)

This last quote points to a problem that distributors may need to frequently address in sales meetings. The Managing director for the Russian distributor notes that this is highly dependent on who the customer is.

In the case of large companies looking for company prevention programs, the issue lies in providing scientific evidence that the solution works and produces desirable outcomes for musculoskeletal pain patients. However, for physiotherapy clinics, which are usually privately owned, there is a distinct need to convince them that the solution can be economically viable within their own clinic operations. The Country manager for the Netherlands provides an example, where if the prospective buyer's clinic only had 1-2 physiotherapists then the salesperson would bring them to visit a reference clinic, which only has 2-3 physiotherapists working in order to show that it is possible. The manager says this is a way to utilize the reference clinic in a way that targets the potential customer and its specifications.

For the problem of business viability, one distributor discusses the need to show prospective customers how to utilize the case company's solution profitably. The Managing director for the Spanish distribution partner believes that it is significantly important for the salesperson to identify what the needs of the buyer are and how their clinic(s) currently operate. Then, the salesperson determines the right message to target the interested buyer's needs and current situation. He noteds that the internal management at David Health Solutions should consider utilizing different business plans from around the world by presenting them in sales situations to prospective customers. By providing these sales tools, the case company can help the interested buyer make a purchasing decision, but only to a certain point. In the end, the prospective customer is the one that must see a viable business opportunity.

"*It's not just the devices we have to sell, the most difficult part is building a business around the concept. So, we need to know the customer and know what they want the products for. There are different stages of how customers understand what they are* *going to do with the devices and how they are going to make money with the concept. It is work that the customer must do by themselves, and when they know what they are going to do then they will buy. You cannot force that, that is the work that the customer has to do, but we can help give them the right tools."* (Managing director, Spain)

Interviewees within the case company's internal management also voice this sentiment. For example, the Sales director at David Health Solutions explains in detail the different operative models, from insurance-payer based to out-of-pocket models. In the case of out-of-pocket customers, the Sales director sends prospective customers to a clinic owner in Hungary because of the successful implementation they have been able to achieve. In addition, internal management ties this need for customer targeting to the use of reference cases.

"*It's also important to do one's homework to see if they want the full system or if they just want one concept. It's important to try to find what is the problem either financially, in terms of space, or just too scared to take the risk…being able to listen to the customer and present solutions that fit the specifications they are currently dealing with. This will help understand what reference cases we would use in those cases*." (COO, internal)

The need for tools and material to utilize in sales meetings to correctly target the prospective customer is in line with the need for development of sales processes.

4.5. Developing sales processes

Sales processes development comes up in the interview discussion relating to the future outlook of sales operations in the interviews. To the case company's internal management, this translates directly to a need to develop sales processes that follow set protocols, for example in reference case utilization.

> *"We have to learn how to systematically promote these reference cases. This will help entities that have never heard of us learn about what it is we do. This way they can see how others are utilizing our technology and see how it may fit into their operations."* (CEO, internal)

> *"We are a small company with small resources but the way we look externally can be controlled. We need to have guidelines that we can follow concretely and have everything in line with this."* (Marketing manager, internal)

Not only is this need for processes seen as generally beneficial to those within David Health Solutions, but it is seen as a way to support the distribution network as well.

> *"It's been left halfway how to give the right tools to our distributors…Perhaps a sales book that shows how to handle each specific target customer group in order to make this more systematic. This could help us make sure we're utilizing best practices in all the markets we are selling to"* (CEO, internal)

The interviewed distributors do not explicitly demand the development of protocols from the case company but do wish for different support tools from David Health Solutions. For example, a few of the interviewees feel they need help in developing the use of reference cases further. These relate directly to figuring out the best way to present reference cases to prospective customers, so that the treatment and financial outcomes are understandable. A couple of the distributors desire a previously used geographical location finder tool to be brought back to the company's official website. They believe this is a useful tool to show the international reach that the company has. Overall, there are aspects of the case company's sales processes that can be developed and structured to provide additional support to the entire sales organization network.

4.6. Summary of the findings

The findings provide answers to the defined research questions of this case study. For the overarching research question, the findings show how David Health Solutions utilizes customer reference cases in international sales operations. This includes utilizing customer reference cases through various forms of media, coordinating customer reference visits in different ways, and providing sales material from videos to slideshow presentations. In relation to the first research sub-question, the findings show that it is relevant for David Health Solutions' distributor network to utilize customer reference cases in sales. The interviewees express feelings of positivity in relation to using reference cases and believe that reference cases provide useful information to potential customers. Following this, the qualitative data also answers the second sub-question. The findings show that reference cases are communicated in various ways within the case company's international sales organization. There is no standardized or uniform approach to this reference case utilization as both the internal team and international distributors have their own unique approaches. The proceeding section provides a more in-depth discussion on the study's findings.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of the empirical research have many connections to the academic literature that was investigated for the purpose of this study. Discussing the findings in relation to previous academic research provides a better understanding of how the sales organization at David Health Solutions utilizes customer reference cases because it connects previous findings to those of this empirical study. In addition, the research sub-questions relating the applicability of reference utilization and how the entire sales organization communicates these reference cases are answered.

5.1. Does reference case utilization make sense here?

From the findings, it is apparent that the David Health Solutions' sales organization utilizes customer reference cases. In order to discern how David Health Solutions' sales organization utilizes customer reference cases, the findings are analyzed against the Simplified reference model (Salminen & Möller, 2006). However, before delving into the practicalities of the reference case utilization, the internal and external factors are described in order to understand if the use of customer references at David Health Solutions is practical. This provides a basis of, if and how, customer references are relevant to the defined context.

There are several factors, both internal and external, that affect customer reference utilization. The internal factors are the supplier's growth strategy and target group signaling and affect what reference practices the supplier adheres to (Salminen & Möller, 2006). These factors affect both internal and external reference case use, however this study focuses solely on the external use of customer references. Because there are no set processes for customer reference signaling from the supplier David Health Solutions, the distribution suppliers are left to create their own referencing strategies.

The use of target group signaling is discussed by the case company's internal management as being an important step to take because of the different implementation possibilities of the product offering. The distributors consider it important to define target groups because of the varying needs that different customers have. Even within a local market, there are differing types of prospective buyers. For privately owned clinics, business models are important whereas large companies need evidence of product functionality. This points to a lack in structure of customer reference utilization at David Health Solutions because it is a process that is unstructured and not uniform throughout the sales organization. Attention should be put to these internal factors for the supplier's influence in customer reference utilization to be managed. This is a factor that the supplier has direct influence on.

The external factors that affect reference case usage relate to environmental, supplier, and purchase-problem characteristics (Salminen & Möller, 2006). These factors cannot be changed by the case company, rather they offer evidence of whether customer reference utilization is applicable to the defined context. In terms of environmental factors, the home country's image in the medical industry is high for Finland and the market is relatively competitive, according to the interviewees. A positive country image means that references carry less influence. However, the competitive nature of the medical rehabilitation device market increases the influence of customer reference utilization because if a buyer is faced with several options of similar perceived value, then customer references can affect the decision-making process.

The supplier's characteristics for this study are considered by the interviewees to be the characteristics of David Health Solutions because it is the overarching supplier of the technology. The small size of the case company can mean more influence from customer references, while the strong internationalization and reputation can mean that references are less essential. The interviewees note that David Health Solutions has a strong reputation on the market and that the company's international reach is widely discussed in sales meetings. However, the company's global reach may not be as apparent as it could be. Several of the distributors note the need for a clinic/customer geographical locator, which would better illustrate the international reach of the technology. This is a characteristic that excites potential customers and builds their perceived trust.

The purchase-problem characteristics are dependent on the potential customer. Although this group is not a part of the study, several inferences can be made from the discussions with the sales representatives. The purchase-problem characteristics are divided into product-related and supplier-related factors (Salminen & Möller, 2006). Product-related factors include degree of importance, complexity, familiarity, purchasing frequency, and innovation. Highly complex and innovative investments increase the perceived risk and uncertainty the customer feels (Jalkala & Salminen, 2010; Hada, Grewal & Lilien, 2014) which increases the influence of customer references (Salminen & Möller, 2006). In addition, highly technological and pricy investments are also considered to benefit from reference cases because they help to decrease the perceived risk and ambiguity surrounding the product offering (Anderson & Wynstra, 2010). The price of the DAVID product offering is considered by the distributors to be a significant barrier for potential customers. For this reason, one of the interviewees says they only discuss the price of the technology after a reference visit has taken place. Here, the reference visit may help reduce the uncertainty and doubt the potential customer feels about the investment. The product-related factors of the DAVID technology increase the need for customer references because they can lower the customer’s perceived risk, ambiguity, and uncertainty.

The potential customer also considers supplier-related factors including familiarity, degree of dependence, and depth of interaction (Salminen & Möller, 2006). The familiarity with David Health Solutions varies across the different markets and is dependent on how many technology installations the market has. Reference cases can help bring attention to the case company in markets where the technology is scarce and therefore unfamiliar. In addition, the technology requires a long-term commitment, strong dependence and interaction level with the supplier due to the need for device and software education. For this reason, customer references can help increase perceived trust in the supplier because the potential customer can see successful partnerships with existing customers (Salminen & Möller, 2006; Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola, 2013).

Reference case utilization makes sense within the defined context of the sales organization at David Health Solutions. Internal factors, especially target group signaling, points to a need for structured processes to be made for management and/or the distributor to be able to signal the correct customer references to the potential customer. The external factors also point to a need for customer reference utilization since the market is competitive and the company is small. Moreover, the product offering is a complex, innovative and expensive investment. The supplier-buyer relationship is also highly dependent and interactive. By considering both internal and factors that affect customer reference utilization, it can be concluded that reference utilization is applicable and significantly imperative in the case of David Health Solutions. Now, the actual utilization can be described.

5.2. What to show and who to tell?

The Simplified reference model describes three actors present in reference case utilization. These are the supplier, the potential customer, and the existing customer. In the case study, the supplier represents the country's distributing partner, with David Health Solutions as the overarching supplier. Nevertheless, there is close contact between these entities throughout the sales processes. The potential customer is a client who is interested in purchasing the DAVID technology and is in contact with the distributor of the local market. The existing customer is the customer reference that is signaled to the potential customer. For this, there are several different approaches that the various distributors took.

When discussing customer references with the interviewees, all of them frequently use the terms 'customer testimonials' and 'customer stories'. This alludes to the fact that the reference cases are seen less as factual cases and more as a story of a customer. This theme is also apparent in the way the references are communicated to potential customers. Although the distributors use customer references in both sales tools and verbal communication formats, there is a noticeable emphasis placed on storytelling. Sales tools such as pictures, direct quotes, and videos are illustrative and rich formats and are widely mentioned by the distributors. These types of customer references are more apparent in the sales presentations provided by the interviewees than other 'less rich' formats. These types of media formats, including written testimonials and reference lists (Venkatesan & Kumar, 2004), are mentioned in the interviews but less emphasis is placed on them.

The use of storytelling is apparent in the verbal communication of reference cases. Customer visits are considered to be very important by the interviewees as they usually include direct communication with the reference customer. This storytelling aspect may be what defines customer references within the sales organization.

Previous literature considered many facets of how to define customer reference cases. This included discussion on how reference cases provide indirect proof of a supplier's capability to deliver a product or service (Salminen & Möller, 2006), evidence of a positive outcome between the supplier and existing customer (Terho & Jalkala, 2017), and information on the customer's experience with a supplier (Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola, 2013). These three definitions help to understand the purpose of reference case utilization. In the context of

David Health Solutions, some key points from these definitions are incorporated into the entire sales organization's understanding of customer reference utilization. The testimonial articles, customer quotes, and pictures of clinic installations provide indirect proof of the distributor's capability to deliver the product. Whereas reference visits to established customers provide evidence of a positive outcome and may provide information on the experience between the customer and the supplier.

Several of the distributors discuss the importance of customer speaking directly with customer during a reference visit. Although a customer visit does include supplier involvement as the supplier is the facilitator of the interaction (Aarikka-Stenroos & Makkonen, 2014), an effort is made to try to lessen this influence. Some of the distributors including those in the German, Dutch and Russian markets discuss an approach where they ask or hire the reference customer or clinic physiotherapists to discuss with the potential customer in a private session. These conversations provide the potential customer with useful information on how the product offering functions through demonstration and discussions on the customer's personal experiences with the technology. These are considered key reasons as to why potential customers see customer visits as valuable sources of information (Salminen & Möller, 2006; Aarikka-Stenroos & Makkonen, 2014). This practice helps increase the potential customer's trust in the product offering and claims being made. Of course, trust must also be present for this customer visit to be beneficial (Kumar, Petersen, & Leone, 2013; Viio & Grönroos, 2014). The three distributors do state that they trust the customer and physiotherapist to rely positive experiences, not because they are told to, but because they are genuine in their storytelling. There are other aspects to note regarding the choice of customer references cases.

Due to the lack of internal processes for customer reference utilization by David Health Solutions, the utilization approach is left to each of the distributors to undertake individually. Four of the distributor partners, all in well-established markets use local customer references. Here, familiarity with the established customer is noted as important because the potential customer immediately recognizes these. This may allude to the fact that a familiar company/clinic/customer is more respected by the interested customer. Respect is a beneficial aspect when choosing a customer reference to present because the perceived credibility of the supplier increases (Anderson & Wynstra, 2010).

The sales organization at David Health Solutions utilizes customer references as a form of storytelling to provide evidence that the technology is functional and relieves patients' musculoskeletal pain problems. Customer references are mainly used in illustrative sales tools and customer reference visits because they provide the potential customer with more information on the existing customer. The reasons the sales organization utilizes these customer references are similar to the desired outcomes detailed in the Simplified reference model. Firstly, customer references help to increase the perceived competence and credibility of the supplier (Salminen & Möller, 2006) because the potential customer can verify that successful device installations exist. In addition, the supplier's perceived reputation also improves as a potential customer has more positive experiences. As noted previously, the perceived risk the potential customer faces can also decrease with reference utilization because the customer can see that the supplier has successful business relationships with existing customers.

5.3. How are reference cases communicated?

There is not a structured or uniform approach to communicating customer reference cases within the sales organization at David Health Solutions. Nevertheless, there are a few similarities to the four-phase approach described in the Simplified reference model. In the phased approach the supplier creates preconditions, influences comparison, signals references, and examines the results to create a feedback loop (Salminen & Möller, 2006). These four phases can be considered to understand how the case company's sales organization communicates reference cases.

In the first step of the four-phased approach outlined by Salminen and Möller (2006), the supplier creates preconditions for possible reference customers. In this case study, some of the distributors have pre-arranged agreements with established customers. They arrange visits to these specific clinics, where the owner and/or physiotherapists talk directly to the potential customers. In the second phase, the supplier signals the reference case to the potential customer. In the case study, this is done by providing references in the sales tools or through reference visits. The purpose of this signaling stage is to achieve the desired outcomes discussed in the previous section. However, as noted in the Simplified reference model, the first phase should include targeted signaling. This is a strategy that is lacking in the case company's sales organization. If the potential customer is still interested in the solution, the next step may commence.

In the third phase, the supplier tries to influence the comparison standards of the potential customer. The model suggests arranging a reference visit. This differs from the studied context because the sales organization mainly uses the reference visit in the very beginning of the communication process. The fourth phase relates to the supplier receiving a feedback loop from the potential customer in an effort to see if the referencing behavior was successful or not (Salminen & Möller, 2006). This theme is completely left out of the interviews and therefore cannot be commented on its relation to the case study. Perhaps there is room for improvement in obtaining feedback from potential customers in order to better understand the effect customer reference utilization has. The same can be said for the sales material used to communicate reference cases.

The sales tools and verbal communication of reference cases are similar for all of the distributors. However, the distributors believe that reference case communication can be improved. There is an apparent desire for richer sales tools, especially in the form of videos. Potential customers feel that richer media formats show a great effort by the seller to rely information on their offering (Kumar, Petersen & Leone, 2013). It is therefore understandable why distributors feel reference case communication could be improved. This can be done by creating videos that show and explain the technology, as well as patient and clinic testimonials. Moreover, distributors should consider the impact of having material in the market's local language. This should be taken into consideration in order to make the material relevant to the market. A potential customer considers these improvements as a greater effort made by the supplier.

6. CONCLUSION

The conclusion contains a summary of the research, managerial implications, as well as limitations and suggestions for further research topics.

6.1. Summary of the research

This embedded single-case study describes customer reference utilization within the sales organization of David Health Solutions. The empirical research includes interviews with the case company's internal management as well as its first-tier distributor network, which is comprised of seven different markets. Customer reference utilization is relevant to the case company because of the highly technological, highly priced investment that the product offering entails. Moreover, external characteristics including market competition and small company size boost the importance of reference cases.

The case company uses customer references in sales tools including quotes and videos, as well as through verbal communication in reference visits. Customer reference visits are considered important because they create direct communication between potential buyers and existing customers. This allows for experience and knowledge to be shared in a way that decreases the salesperson's direct influence. The use of these customer references helps to decrease the customers' perceived risk while increasing perceived credibility, competence, and reputation.

Customer reference utilization and communication are not structured within the sales organization. Some of the distributors try to signal targeted reference cases, while some do not or are not able to due to lack of reference cases. All of the interviewees, internal management and the distribution partners alike, believe customer stories and reference visits to be a useful sales tool format in the case of selling the case company's technology. However, processes and target group signaling are not structured within the sales organization. There are several implications management should consider.

6.2. A note to management

The sales organization at David Health Solutions should utilize customer references in sales efforts. The internal and external characteristics which include the market, supplier-related and product-related factors, point to the fact that customer reference utilization is applicable to this sales organization. However, the approach must be developed.

The use of target signaling is inherently discussed with distributors even though there is no defined protocol within the sales organization. The implementation of target signaling within the supplier's own referencing strategy would make customer reference utilization more useful to customers. Distributors and internal management should consider the significance of presenting reference customers with inherent similarities to the potential customer, including same industry, need for the product offering, and job function. This target signaling is alluded to in the research when a few of the distributors discussed having doctors speak with doctors and physiotherapists discuss the offering with other physiotherapists. However, this aspect should be taken into consideration for target group signaling and a structured approach should be followed in order to make it easier for potential customer to relate the reference to the buyer's own situation.

The sales organization should also improve communication processes of customer reference cases. The distributors note that potential customers are more interested in storytelling through highly visual sales tools and verbal communication. Sales tools should be improved to include more visual material such as videos, pictures, and audio. As mentioned, a doctor will be more interested in listening to the opinion of a fellow doctor, and a physiotherapist from a physiotherapist. Therefore, sales material should also target the specific actor to signal the appropriate message and story. In addition, the global reach of the technology can also be shown through sales material. By highlighting stories and technology installations from various locations around the world, a potential customer can understand the company's global reach better. Incorporating a geographical clinic locator on the website also strengthens its "permanently available exhibition" status. The case company's communication of customer reference cases through reference visits can also be improved.

Customer reference visits are the best way for distributors to convey the technology and a reference case to potential customers. This is because reference visits are an efficient way to show functionality of the technology, competence and reputation of the case company, opinions of a current customer, and the buyer-supplier relationship experience. With so many key aspects being covered during a reference visit, the case company should consider improving this approach. Reference visits should be utilized with the same idea of target signaling in mind. If the potential customers are purchasing for a hospital, then they should be taken to a reference hospital. In addition, verbal communication between potential customer and existing customer is imperative. The case company should encourage its distributors to make strong connections with current customers. When reference visits are organized, the distributor should have the potential customer speak directly with the existing customer. Here target signaling also applies. A doctor should speak with a doctor, and a clinic owner with a clinic owner. This also reduces the supplier involvement in these reference visit scenarios, making the situation feel less like a sales meeting.

All in all, target signaling can improve the utilization processes and effects of customer reference cases. By improving the company's internal strategy, distributors can also improve their approaches. Sales material and reference visits should have target signaling at the forefront, in order for the material and visits to be applicable to the potential customer. In addition, storytelling should also be incorporated. Sales material should have visual aids which share stories of patients, clinic owners, and doctors. This way potential patients, clinic owners, and doctors can better relate to the story being told. Reference visits should include direct communication so that potential customers can get the full story directly from the existing customer. These improvements will help make customer references more relatable to potential customers, who can then make more informed decisions as to whether David Health Solutions' product and service offering is the right choice for them.

6.3. Limitations and suggestions for future research

This thesis research includes limitations and suggestions for future research to consider. The limitations of this thesis research are derived from the qualitative, embedded single-case study approach utilized to describe the phenomenon of customer reference utilization in the sales operations of David Health Solutions. The suggestions for further research are suggestions to combat these research limitations.

The limitations of this case study include subjectivity issues. When analyzing the data and reporting the findings of the qualitative data collection, I had to make judgements about the data. This included creating codes and themes and extracting information that I deemed relevant to answering my research question. This process is highly dependent on what I, the researcher, considered noteworthy and applicable. In addition, my close connection to the case company may create a subjective view of the product offering, internal processes, and opinions of who was interviewed. Although, I did try to remain objective throughout the process, low objectivity is a limitation of this thesis research.

Generalizability of case study research is significantly limited due to the narrow, defined context that is the subject of the research (Yin, 2014). This research only considered the sales organization at one company, David Health Solutions. Although this context is defined in the research question and is the focus of the research, only a portion of the sales organization was considered.

The research is limited to only including the first-tier distributors at David Health Solutions and does not consider lower tiers of distribution partners. In addition, the interviews conducted with internal management only consider those directly tied to sales operations and do not include the viewpoints of other personnel who are secondarily involved with sales. Furthermore, the research focused on the selling side and did not consider the buyer's or customer's perspectives. Current customers and prospective buyers are not considered for this research. These different opinions would have provided different angles to the phenomenon. Although the generalizability of this research is very limited as the focus is placed on the sales organization at David Health Solutions, the different angles could have provided more depth to the phenomenon-based research.

Suggestions for future research can help to decrease these limitations of high subjectivity and low generalizability. In order to increase objectivity, third-party researchers could be used to ensure that internal subjectivity decreases. Other methods of data collection can also be utilized, including quantitative methods such as surveys and questionnaires. This can help to provide numerical data on how customer reference cases are used, measured opinions towards utilization, and more. These surveys and questionnaires can also be used to further expand the research and include the opinions of current customers and interested buyers in relation to customer reference utilization. Nevertheless, including these two actors would provide more depth to the research in the future. In this instance, the research question and context expand to include more of the processes and characteristics that affect customer reference utilization at the case company, David Health Solutions. These suggestions relate only to the case company which is the focus of this research. Other companies within the industry could be considered to triangulate the findings, and other industries could be included to understand influence in other product and service offerings.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Interview Guide for David Health Solutions Internal Management

1. Introduction
    a. What is your current role within David Health Solutions?
2. Sales operations and material at David Health Solutions
    a. Describe the history of sales operations at David Health Solutions.
    b. In your opinion, what is the best way to show the David product offering to potential customers?
    c. What sales tools/materials are given to distributor partners?
3. Customer reference cases
    a. What is your opinion on customer reference case utilization within David Health Solutions?
    b. What customer reference cases do you use with interested buyers?
    c. What information do you think is relevant in these cases?
4. Future outlook
    a. Do you feel anything is lacking in the company's sales material?
    b. What information or material do you think would help you in sales meetings?
    c. What support should be given to the distribution network?

Appendix 2: Interview Guide for David Health Solutions International Distributor

1. Introduction
    a. What is your current relationship with David Health Solutions?
    b. What is your history of working with David Health Solutions?
2. Sales operations and material
    a. What do you share with potential customers in sales meetings?
    b. How do you showcase the David product offering to potential customers?
    c. In your opinion, what is the best way to show the David product offering to potential customers?
    d. What sales material do you share with potential customers?
    e. What is the usefulness of the current sales material portfolio?
3. Customer reference cases
    a. What customer reference cases do you share with potential customers?

b. What information is provided in these cases?
c. How do the potential customers respond to these reference cases?

4. Future outlook
    a. Are there future plans for expanding or improving your sales material?
    b. Is there room for improvement regarding the sales material provided by the supplier David Health Solutions?
    c. What information or material do you think would help you and your salespeople in sales meetings?